

Though boys throw stones at frogs in sport, the frogs do not die in sport, but in earnest. —Bion

I am twenty birds back on the left side of the skein, looking over my shoulder at Malachi. He has taken many pellets in his eastern wing and cannot pull it high enough for a full stroke. My right leg is dragging as we hammer our way south in the late afternoon. Two pieces of shot are embedded there, and they will cause me great difficulty when we land.

We stayed too long in the north. All of us knew that. But the summer ran late and warm; we became fat, floated on amiable water, and delayed the leaving. Lobu had argued for days that it was time to go. But we whined or laughed at him and refused to rise when he urged us.

A cold night rain fell and turned to sleet by morning. We did not see four men take their places in long marsh grass when the sun was still far down the curve of Earth. At dawn, they began shooting while we were sleepy on the water.

Lobu sounded the lifting cry and was in the air at the first hint of camouflaged movement in the grass. I saw him begin to rise even before his warning slid across the pond. And I remember marveling at the great power of his young body, his wings taking him first along the water, then into a long curving roll as he fought for height and distance. I wondered if I had looked that splendid in my second year. Others picked up the cry, and I knew this was more than Lobu's way of getting us moving. Amalo, one of the youngest geese, looked at me for a moment in panic and indecision. I signaled him instantly, reaffirming what he feared, and we began our takeoff, struggling desperately for speed, for another day, for another moment.

I called upon myself for the strength that once was there. I called upon myself for all that I had ever been. To my left, I could see a hunter swinging his dark barrel in a practiced, even way, following the wife of Jonaku through early light.

Coming off the water she exploded in a cloud of blood and feathers as the full load hit her. Jonaku trembled when he went over her floating body only two feet below him. The hunters were firing shell after shell from pump guns, and I could see pellets digging into the water ahead of me.

East we all were moving, perpendicular to the guns, straight into a curious mixture of freezing rain and rising sun. Birds were tumbling downward, some giving cries, others falling only in silence. The guns kept firing as I reached climbing speed. Malachi had drawn almost even with me, coming up on my left as we passed directly in front of the muzzles.

Rolling upward to the right. Apricot flame. A surge of it. Buffeting cone of mountain thunder. At the same moment I felt the impact on my leg, Malachi shuddered and began to fall, but caught himself and stayed low behind a stand of tall grass where the guns could not find him.

Sixty yards out. Almost safe. Coming around to follow Lobu, I could see a cumbrous man sloshing through the water, a spaniel beside him. He was shouting a wild cry of exultation and waving his gun above his head. I did not understand the words he said.

Birds were struggling, others lay still. Sori paddled in small, tight circles flopping randomly, a piece of shot in her brain.

while the dog swam toward her. Zachary, the old one,

was injured, but tried one more time to follow us. As he flailed wildly near the edge of the pond, a man in camouflage shot him again, and he died there on northern water.

I banked into a strong wind from the western lands and fell into place.

Other birds were doing the same. Water streamed from our feathers and flashed in the light of Mother sun, while Lobu took us southward.

There are two great rivers in the middle of this land. We are flying sixty miles east of the one that flows from the Montana highlands, three

hundred miles north of the Missouri lakes. Ahead on the point, Lobu is pushing us hard. He is angry with us for lingering so long at the pond of morning, and we know he is right to be angry. Seven birds were killed by the hunters.

Light snow is falling. The color of the sky matches Lobu's mood. Our cadence has been steady for the last seven hours, and we listen to the Words. Heard they are, but not spoken. The sound unfolds from the meter of our wings. There is a slight unevenness in our stroking, and it is from this that the Words arise.

Like a great pulsing sigh they come, sweeping back along the lines in which we fly. "Awhooooom" is the sound. "Awhooooom—We Are One." It is our creed and our comfort.

The Words wash over me, and wondering about Malachi, I turn once more to look at him. I am startled to see blood coming from his left eye. I had not noticed the blood before, and I remember again that only his body saved me from the full load of shot. His good eye glitters with pain and desperation as he stares straight ahead, giving full energy to his flight.

Lobu is curving us around a tall structure with a round, dish-shaped plate at the top and over wires connected to it. We do not know the name of this thing, though we have seen many of them before.

Below, thin sheets of ice begin to form on shallow patches of water. The snow is falling with more intensity now, and each of us knows that we must keep moving. A blizzard would take many of us.

Ten yards across from me, in the western line, Shanta is also watching Malachi. They are old lovers. She feels an enduring warmth for him and tries to send some of her strength over the empty sky between them.

When I had younger wings, the long southern flight was exhilarating. There were many places to come down and rest at evening. Now the water has disappeared. From this height, we can see traces of primitive contours where

once the marshes could be found.

They are gone now. To other things they are gone. To houses and planted fields and roads. And there is little left for us.

Much of the remaining water is surrounded by guns, preserved only for the killing, not for the good. It is said the hunters fight with their money and their time to save the marshlands, and, though we try, we find it difficult to be grateful. We do not understand the killing; we can only fly before it.

The young ones ask about the killing. "Why?" they ask. We have no answers, for there seem to be none. Once there were reasons, the very old ones say, but those reasons disappeared long before the marshes died.

"But," the young ones press us, "if not for the meat, then why? And why have they taken the marshes if they want our flesh? It makes no sense!"

In those moments, we would turn to Zachary. He had lifted in terror from many ponds, had fought for the safety of altitude through a thousand magenta dawns with buckshot lacing the red face of Mother sun, had seen the waters smeared with blood and lifeless birds floating on silent mornings, had counted in his years the disappearance of the places for living. Finally he would speak, but only after the young ones could not be quieted with generalities and platitudes.

"I have no way of understanding the thoughts of humans. I can only repeat what has come down to me through the elders. The origins of what I will tell you are shrouded by the failure of memories and the embellishment of time. I know only that the words were given by one of many forms who rested on a long sandbar in summer firelight and spoke in a tongue that knew no boundaries. When the elders asked the same questions that you now ask about the ways of humans, they were cau-

tioned to listen, to remember. And the traveler spoke thusly:

*Ancient dreams, there are,*

*Unresolved.*

*And lingering impulses*

*From the days of rocks and fire,*

*Just after the great ice had gone.*

*A reluctance to come before*

*Themselves and ask,*

*'Who are we, and what is our place*

*Among all things?'*

*An avoidance, there is,*

*Of eternal questions,*

*Difficult and submerged.*

*Questions yielding not to*

*Force but only to*

*Subtle strands of*

*Intelligence and feelings*

*Woven full and pure*

*Into a cloth that*

*Catches the soft wind Of*

*Enlightenment*

*Like a billowing,*

*Saffron-colored sail*

*Upon an endless river.*

*The answers are feared.*

*So the questions are scuttled.*

*For the answers,*

*If they are firm*

*And truly given,*

*Would require change.*

*Those who profit now*

*Would profit less.*

*Enlightenment*

*Gives rise to*

*Kindness*

*And*

*Simplicity*

*And Quietude.*

By ROBERT J. WALLER

# Southern Flight

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*Little profit  
Can be found.  
In any of those.  
And, like yourselves on a  
Warm autumn day,  
When it seems the  
Croupier can be denied  
Forever,  
They are reluctant To rise.*

With that, he would swim away and pretend to busy himself at feeding along a shore where the wild rice yet grew. We shall miss Zachary.

Word has traveled far, and we have heard about the condor and the falcon. And the little sparrows of the Florida swamps. We have seen the canvasbacks languishing and the streams turning dark with soil from the fields. The places for living are being taken or sullied with poison.

Behind me, I hear a small sound. I turn to look at Malachi and see his damaged wing flapping out of harmony with the good one. There is more blood coming from his injured eye. Fear screams from the other. He begins to fall away.

I start to follow him, but clearly he is gone. His bad wing no longer is stroking, and I watch him drop toward a small grove of trees through a winter twilight. He crashes into branches and lies tangled there, hanging head down and still.

Southward we move, pounding through the snow with Lobu guiding us. The only sound I hear are the Words. From our wings they come, and sweeping back along the wind they find and comfort me.